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ABSTRACT

As prototypes for new forms of education, public and private alternative schools have much to offer regular schools in the way of new ideas. This paper provides an overview of alternative schools and the options available. Alternative schools are characterized by a more selected student body, a smaller and less bureaucratic structure, values derived from within the school community, holistic student work, and a recognition of the school-survival issue. The basic educational frameworks within the array of public alternative school options are identified: (1) the traditional approach; (2) the nontraditional and nongraded approach; (3) schools that focus on the development of student abilities; (4) schools that emphasize techniques for delivering education (rather than philosophy); (5) schools with community-based organizing principles; (6) the self-directed, Montessori-like environment; (7) schools that are intentionally structured for particular student groups; and (8) subcontracted arrangements. In conclusion, alternative schools are flexible and able to respond to students' various needs. (LMI)

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America's Alternative Schools: Prototypes for New Public Schools

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Running Head: ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Public and private alternative schools abound in the United States. But they are not accorded a great deal of attention. Yet, as prototypes for new forms of education, these institutions have much to offer regular schools in the way of new ideas. This paper was written to assist a discussion of alternative schools at a UCEA conference.

America's Alternative Schools: Prototypes for New Public Schools

Alternative schools come in many shapes and forms. There are private and public alternative schools. There are large ones that espouse a coercive philosophy[1] of student control and there are diminutive ones that operate according to principles of free will and student choice[2]. Yet these schools are a minority and contain a small percentage of the students in the United States. Why would one be interested in such schools? Stephen Gould once wrote, "If you want to understand what ordinary folks do, one thoughtful deviant will teach you more than ten thousand solid citizens."[3] In contrast with the common public school, most alternative schools are deviants. They do things differently. They may serve, therefore, as a rich source of ideas for innovation in education.

Defining alternative schools is difficult. Duke referred to them as

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[1]Boys Town operates a large residential school for boys in Omaha, NE and uses behaviorally grounded theory to control students and change their behaviors.

[2]A one teacher alternative public school in Salem, OR provides students with choice in attending. Many alternative schools permit this element of choice, i.e. student must want to attend.

[3]Stephen Gould, The Flamingo's Smile, (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 1985), p. 101.

"a school accessible by choice, not assignment."[4] Vernon Smith said that special function schools that serve students assigned to them could not be considered alternative.[5] Yet there are many schools in many of America's cities that serve students assigned to them and wear the alternative label proudly. As Kelley documents in her study of California continuation schools, the label alternative is not the one necessarily preferred. Discriminating between regular and alternative schools on the basis of assignment and choice is reasonable, but it there is much that is missed about alternative schools with such a broad distinction.[2]

There have been many opportunities for American youth to satisfy the compulsory school laws in institutions beyond the regular neighborhood or community school. For years, the independent day and boarding schools have catered to an academic elite that is generally upper class in both education and wealth.[3] There are many subsets of these schools and there are even alternative schools to these elite alternatives. The schools of the sixties that advocated educational approaches in keeping with A.S. Neil would be examples. The Lewis Wadams School in upstate New York was a school based on the pedagogy of A.S. Neil. Schools

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[4]Dan Duke

[5]Vernon Smith, Alternative Schools, 1974

[2] Deirdre Kelly. Last Chance High (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1993).

[3] Christine Doudna. "The $150,000 Blue Blazer" Investment Vision, August/September, 1991, p. 29-38.

utilizing Outward Bound principles as a central part of their pedagogy like the former Stowe School in Stowe, Vt. would be another. In the 70s Maurice Gibbons's walkabout concept influenced a number of schools, most prominently that of Sudbury Valley, a small private school in western Massachusetts. (Gibbons, PDK, May, 1984). With their emphasis on individual growth, community values, and creative expression, many of the Friends schools also have served as alternatives to the traditional elite private day and boarding schools.

One of the largest and most available alternatives is the Catholic parochial system. Some would argue that the Catholic parochial system is not a true alternative because that system was created not as an alternative to the public school system but as an equivalent institution. It was invented to look as much like the public system as possible since its founders wanted everything the public schools provided except the Protestant religious values.[6] Thus, the Catholic system is seen as a substitute in kind. But, in many communities, it does serve as an alternative in the eyes of consumers.

The list of schools and institutions that serve as alternatives to regular schools is extensive and stretches backward into American educational history. For example, one of the fascinating and inspiring stories of alternative education is that of Marietta Johnson and her Organic School at Fairhope, Alabama. (Johnson, Thirty Years with an Idea, Univ. of Alabama Press). The Waldorf and Montesorri schools are also

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[6]David Tyack, The One Best System, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

clear alternatives to regular public schools.

Gold and Mann offered a list of characteristics of alternative schools:

> 1) alternative schools tailor the educational process to the individual student;
>
> 2) alternative schools usually suspend the conventional social norms governing the relationships between student and teacher;
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> 3) alternative schools value individual differences rather than an impersonal neutrality;
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> 4) alternative schools use personal relationships as a means of achieving student growth and development.[7]

Gold and Mann's definition fits more closely the types of schools that were reviewed in creating this paper. Schools with a clear religious intent and schools in the large parochial system are not included as alternative schools in this paper.

These schools are exceedingly diverse. Alternative schools may function with just one teacher.[8] They may devote substantial amounts of time to experiential education such as backpacking trips or outdoor

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[7]Martin Gold and David Mann, Expelled to a Friendlier Place, (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1984).

[8]In the 1970s and early 1980s a Vermont teacher ran a one person, fully accredited private high school that traveled about the country in an eight person station wagon. Today in Salem, OR a public alternative operates next to North Salem High School that has but one teacher.

adventure.[9] Many, particularly public alternative schools, organize the class day differently than do regular schools.[10] The organizational roles that are assumed by the administration, teachers, and students are frequently quite different from those assumed in the regular public school.[11] For example, teachers in most alternative schools have significant professional autonomy in making decisions about the academic program and about curricular delivery. Students are often part of the process that deals with school rules and their application.[12] There seems

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[9]The former Stowe School, the present Colorado Rocky Mountain School and Putney School, are examples of alternative schools that have operated in the tradition of experiential education tracing roots back to Dewey and Homer Lane. M. Gibbons popularized the walkabout concept in the 1980s and it has inspired innovation. Many schools have some form of experiential education.

[10]The Bryan Learning Center in Lincoln, NE has a warm-up period in which students arrive over an extended period of time. A school for teen mothers in Minneapolis starts late in the morning and runs into the early evening.

[11]Teachers in particular define themselves as friends of students and seek to develop personal relations with students.

[12]Frequently students in alternative schools participate in more inclusive forms of community governance. A.S. Neill's schools, for example, ran town meetings in which decisions were made. This is also true of Quaker oriented schools like High Mowing in MA.

to be a more evident sense of shared purpose.[13]

Many will argue that because they must function like factories with large classes and necessary bureaucratic organization, the regular schools can not readily utilize the sorts of approaches that alternative school do. But, while few regular schools as they are presently designed can achieve the types of education alternative schools do, these alternatives, in their very diversity, can be the source of many useful ideas for the regular school.

Here are some of the characteristics of some alternative schools that appear to distinguish them from regular schools.

A More Selected Student Body

Alternative schools are not for any student. Alternative schools tend to be built for particular kinds of students, be they for the affluent who want their children to attend elite colleges or for the malcontents who are able to find a friendlier last resort before dropping out. Some look for particular kinds of students like those with dyslexia.[14] Some seek only students who want education in particular kinds of religious

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[13]At the alternative public school in Salem, OR both teacher and students have common goals relative to seeing a successful graduation experience for students. At a school like the Landmark School in MA all community members share a sense of purpose that is focused on learning.

[14]The Landmark School in MA is specifically designed for students with dyslexia and takes tremendous pride in the accomplishments of its students.

values.[15] And, some have a broad focus that covers a wide range of student.[16] Almost, but not quite, alternative schools are able to select and reject their clients. Some public alternative schools do not enjoy this flexibility. But if they do not have the ability to select and reject student sent to them from regulars schools in their district, many alternative school teachers feel that they can only do their job if they have this capacity.[17]

Smaller and Less Bureaucratic

Alternative schools tend to be smaller and less bureaucratic. Teachers in these schools appear as more complete personalities to their students. This is because in these schools teachers often interact with students in multiple ways besides the classroom. In large regular schools, teachers perform specialized roles. In smaller, alternative

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[15]The many small religious schools from various Protestant groups that exist in most states would be one example. Various Hebrew and Jewish schools would be another.

[16]A large school like Phillips Andover, hardly an alternative school by many definitions, nonetheless offers a wide array of opportunities to many different kinds of students.

[17]Several teachers at Bryan Learning Center have voiced this concern in that this Lincoln, NE alternative school is presently required to take in students from other city high schools on a demand basis.

schools, teachers perform many roles.[18] They may offer activities for students after school, coach, take students on educational trips, supervise and organize art shows and performances, etc.[19] Teachers in these schools spend a great deal of time in affective education, working on developing relationships of trust and on nurturing student intellectual growth.

Values from Within

It appears that in many alternative schools values come from within the alternative school community. That community may include parents or it may not. What is important is that educators in alternative schools seem much stronger about promoting their notion of what the educational experience for children should be like and much more focused on the vision of schooling that they want to prevail.[20]

This topic is worthy of an extensive analysis that will not be done here. Many alternative schools, particularly private ones, do not showcase

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[18]In a promotional video from Verde Valley in Sedona, AZ the knowledge of teachers as complete adults is clearly prized by students who speak of this several times.

[19]A quick glance through the promotional literature from the North Country School in Lake Placid, NY documents the wide variety of activities that are part of daily life in some alternative schools.

[20]The Landmark School has clear values that come through from all organizational members. It is not necessary for one person to be a spokesperson of those values. Everyone speaks of them.

mission statements as a way to carry values and beliefs. Rather, they promote a way of learning that speaks very clearly to potential customers. Pictures of youth and faculty engaged in learning, descriptive information about what is done, testimonials from alumnus--these are the types of vehicles such schools for carrying their values to the external audience.

This distinction is critical. In the regular school, values are conceived of as an amalgam of the community's values and no particular expediency other than self-protection drives the communication of a mission statement. In the alternative school, values are those constructed by the educators in the school and must be communicated to an external audience if there are to be any customers.

Student Work is Wholistic

Student work tends to be different in alternative schools. In a regular school, student work means working on the curriculum. In many alternative schools, students are expected to work on themselves. This difference has many implications. For example, it is hard to develop a standardized test that measures how well one is doing in working on one's self. It is difficult to structure a program that works in the same way for each individual. Student behaviors that are understood as pathological in a regular school setting become developmental in an alternative setting. Discipline must be structured differently. Students are expected to make choices that contribute to their development and growth. For many this would be in contrast to the common school where students are expected to work on socially established goals. Thus, these schools are characterized

by programs where everything is curricular--activities, sports, events, government. Everything planned by the school educators is intentional and expected to contribute to centrally held goals and ideals.

Survival is Reality

Alternative schools do not operate under a perception of a guaranteed life. The people in them worry about sustaining the energy required for survival. And, alternative schools may fail in greater numbers than regular schools. How these schools relate to their environments is different because survival is an issue. Typically, private schools are much more intentional and public about their educational program then regular schools. Catalogues, viewbooks, videos are all examples of how schools that compete for students promote their program above others. Public alternatives often have an uneasy relationship with their environment because that environment frequently seeks to control the public alternative. Feeder high schools, for example, want to send their problems freely to the local public alternative school while the receiving school wants to exercise some control over student selection and admission. The reasons for this are complex but it is common that educators in public alternatives have very definite ideas about what will work with their clientele.[21] Yet, public alternative schools are usually

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[21] An example of this problem occurs at the Bryan Learning Center in Lincoln, NE where four city high schools seek to send students to Bryan at any time during the year. Bryan faculty resist this and thus far have been able to limit enrollment to pre-determined periods.

mindful that their job is to work as a service institution to regular schools.

One of the responses an organization makes to an uncertain environment is to try to influence possible resources. Alternative schools are responsive to customer needs and try to produce an educational product that will be attractive to students. Private schools have promotional literature that paint education as fun and exciting. Public alternatives often try to be very clear with students about expectations and opportunities.

Customers are Different

Alternative schools deal with students who for a variety of reasons do not work well in the common school. Such students do not, to use Charlie Jones's words, "shift gears very well".[22] There is attention to the needs of a student as a person at a stage of development. It is probably also true that in most alternative schools discipline is not the same kind of problem that it is in the common school, often because there is greater trust between students and adults and often because rules are more structured to support learning than they are to support adult control. This does not mean alternative schools do not encounter the same sorts of discipline problems as regular schools. Attendance and tardiness is a

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[22]Charlie Jones is the educator who runs the alternative school in Salem, OR.

perpetual problem in alternative schools.[23] Educators try to make the school attractive to students so they often seek to avoid being authoritarian in rules. This stance sometimes makes it difficult to develop hard and fast rules about attendance.

Alternative schools frequently attract those who do not fit in well with mass education. Private alternatives might deal with adolescent idealists who rebel at home or at their regular school. Public alternatives often attract bright, rebellious students who seek an environment that permits more self direction. It is also true that public alternative schools attract students who have been unable to adjust to the requirements of regular schools and who have a history of disciplinary problems. Public alternatives also accommodate young adolescent women with young children.

An Array of Public Alternative School Options

In the seventies a great number of public alternative schools were created. Deal and Nolan identified eight basic educational frameworks around which public alternatives could be organized.[24]

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[23] The alternative school in Salem,Oregon kicks students out if they have unexcused absences. It is more relaxed about tardiness. The alternative school in Lincoln has yet to develop a successful approach to student absence.

[24] Terrance Deal and Robert Nolan, Alternative Schools, (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1978).

1) Alternative one is a traditional approach common to most regular school districts. The classroom is the basic learning environment; students are organized according to grades; teachers teach students; students are expected to adjust to the school; a board of education directs the policy of the school.

2) Alternative two is a non-traditional and non-graded approach. This approach is like the British primary school with a great deal of cooperative learning and manipulatives in instruction. The teacher is a facilitator. Learning occurs outside of the classroom.

3) Alternative three focuses on developing student abilities and contains many activities designed to nurture creativity and the development of the individual. The school might define itself as an art school, or a drama school.[25] It might seek to develop particular character traits in students such as self responsibility or self esteem. The many private schools that utilized concepts from Outward Bound would illustrate this aspect of developing character traits.[26]

Alternative four is, according to Deal and Nolan, one oriented toward techniques for delivering education than toward philosophy. Schools that emphasize technology, for example, would fit in this category. Schools

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[25] There are public magnet schools developed about this notion. Schools focusing on the fine or performing arts illustrate.

[26] The Hyde School in Maine would be an example of a private residential school that has become successful working to develop personal characteristics in students. A public school oriented toward increasing self esteem is the Appolo School in Simi Valley, CA.

that operate individualized learning programs for students would fit this category also.

Alternative five uses the concept of community as the organizing principle of the school. It may be residential, it may include a highly participatory government. This is a common organizing principle in private schools that has only recently become articulated for public alternatives. One trend that has fueled this interest comes from the realization that public schools can no longer operate in isolation from their communities.

Alternative six bases its program on a Montesorri type environment. Students are largely self-directed and work in an area that is rich in materials and resources for learning. Teachers guide students. A clear pedagogy and belief system about child development guides teacher behavior and curricular design.

Alternative seven provides schooling that is intentionally structured for particular groups of students. For example, Milwaukee's black academies were built for male, African American students. Minnapolis has a separate school just for teen mothers. Deal and Nolan described the Multi-Cultural Institute in San Francisco that was oriented about five ethnic groups.

Alternative eight showed significant foresight in 1978. This is a subcontracted school. For many years, private schools have sometimes operated under contract to a locality to provide education. The old New England academies were such schools. Privately owned and operated, they

provided education to local towns.[27] Today the idea of charter schools gains momentum. And Boston College is contracted to operate Chelsea, MA public schools.

Deal and Nolan's typology of alternative public schools is incomplete. For example, in many urban districts there are now alternative centers where students enrolled in community based programs come for monitoring and counseling and some coursework. There are residential schools that seek to work with specific populations. And there are other types unknown to this author.

Conclusion

Peter Senge has written about surfacing mental models by which he means testing our assumptions and cognitive schemas.[28] In order for educators to grow and change and provide new ways of schooling children, many of the old ways of doing business need to be challenged. The difficulty here is that many of us are so used to the conventions that have governed American education for 140 years that we do can not conceive of doing things differently.

It is precisely for this reason that American alternative schools

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[27] In Vermont, for example, Burr and Burton Seminary, St. Johnsbury Academy, Lyndon Institute, and St. Albans Academy are examples. These schools serve a local population like any public high school might. But they are private corporations.

[28] Peter Senge, The Fifth Dimension, (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990)

have such promise as a constantly changing seedbed of ideas. It is inventions that change how teachers and students relate to each other and to the curriculum that seem to capture the imagination of educators. For example, the school that values creating a sense of community may have a regular morning meeting. What is presented or discussed at that meeting may frequently be less important than the gathering itself. Teachers may organize their own time according to how they perceive the needs of students. Such professional autonomy may mean that a teacher elects to take a group of students on a fishing trip for a weekend or to a city to visit a museum.

Trying to understand what works for students requires constant attention. No system works for too long without modification. This is because no group of students remains the same for very long. Alternative schools, because they must, are institutions well used to responding to student needs. As educators seek to de-bureaucratize schools, they should find many useful ideas in America's alternative schools.